

Pecha kucha Presentations : What are they and how can we use them in the classroom?

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『ぺちゃくちゃ』プレゼンテーション方法は授業でどのように活用するか？

Pecha kucha Presentations: What are they and how can we use them in the classroom?

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本稿では『ぺちゃくちゃ』というプレゼンテーション方法について紹介し、本プレゼンテーションが外国語教室でどのように活用できるかについて議論する。なお、今後の研究課題として、教師が学習目標を考慮しながら、本プレゼンテーション方法を授業にて活用する方法を探る。

This paper describes the origin and evolution of a revolutionary new presentation style, called “Pecha kucha.” After explaining how Pecha kucha presentations got their start, I will offer some suggestions as to how Pecha kucha presentations can be used by students in the classroom. In the next section, I will also briefly address some of the general criticisms of using classroom time for speeches by English as a Foreign Language learners. Finally, I will offer a summary of Pecha kucha and suggest a few ways in which the presentation style can be utilized not only by students but also by teachers.

Introduction

Classroom presentations are an undeniably important part of the educational process. Indeed, virtually every lesson a teacher gives can be said to be a kind of presentation or at least contain a presentation component. As a result, students spend a great deal of their time in school listening to presentations. Academic literature supports the idea that making speeches has multiple benefits including increased confidence, improved reasoning, better memory, improved writing, reading and listening skills as well as an improvement in ability to communicate (Edwards 1998; Nunn 2005).

In recent years, as part of an increasing movement toward collaborative learning and learner autonomy, students everywhere are more frequently giving presentations themselves and listening to peers' presentations. Combine these educational trends with advances made in presentation software and one might expect that presentation quality has also improved dramatically in recent years. Despite the difficulty in empirically defining what a good presentation is, most observers would agree that presentation quality has not measurably improved. On the contrary, many observers believe that presentation quality has dropped partly as a result of over-reliance on technology like presentation software. James Gleick, author of *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*, has gone so far as to

call the PowerPoint presentation the “demon of information overload” (2011). There is an even more well-known and depressing expression that hints at the prevalent problems of PowerPoint or Keynote presentations, “Death by PowerPoint.” This expression refers to presentations in which the presenter just reads from the slides, presentations that are too long and complex, presentations that include too much text on each slide or presentations that make excessive use of software bells and whistles. Clearly there is room for improvement and, considering how much time both teachers and students spend either giving or listening to presentations, it can't come soon enough.

Pecha kucha

Many Japanese would perhaps be surprised to find that the expression 『ぺちゃくちゃ』 (Pecha kucha), which means “idle chitchat” or “yakkety yak” in Japanese, has become almost as well known around the world as Japanese words such as “tsunami” and “tycoon.” However, Pecha kucha interestingly has a different meaning in English than it does in Japanese. To most non-Japanese familiar with the term, “Pecha kucha” refers to a unique style of presentation. Pecha kucha is a presentation format using either PowerPoint or Keynote software in which a presenter speaks while twenty images are shown to the audience for exactly twenty-seconds each. The speaker has no control over the speed of the image forwarding

as the images forward automatically after twenty-seconds. The speaker talks in sync with the images. Twenty images playing automatically for twenty-seconds before moving on to the next slide makes for a presentation of exactly six minutes and forty-seconds. The spirit of Pecha kucha is that the images should support the speaker's message. The message is not there to explain what you can see. The image should not be too distracting. This is what the term "Pecha kucha" means to the overwhelming number of non-Japanese who are familiar with the term. In the next section of this paper I will explain how Pecha kucha got its start and why so many people around the world have come to know the expression.

Origins

The Pecha kucha presentation format was created by Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham of Klein Dytham architecture in Tokyo, Japan. They came up with the format after listening to one too many fellow architects drone on and on endlessly during a presentation. Klein and Dytham wanted to force speakers to distill their presentations down to the absolute bare minimum; saying and showing only what is necessary while cutting out all superfluous information. Living in Tokyo and being familiar with Japanese they chose to use the expression "Pecha kucha" as the name of their presentation technique as an ironic way to express their disdain for overlong, boring presentations in which the speaker prattles on endlessly. Pecha kucha presentations are necessarily fast-paced and concise, allowing architects, designers and other professionals to show their work and exchange ideas efficiently and productively.

The idea proved so intuitive and the brief presentations so appealing that it spread like wildfire. From its start in Tokyo, Pecha kucha presentations spread first to Europe and then to North America and eventually around the world. Rather than individual presentations, a large impetus for the spread of Pecha kucha as a presentation style was specially organized events with numerous presenters in one night held in various cities. The Pecha kucha presentation events have become social occasions allowing a number of people from diverse fields to get together and take turns presenting on anything that suits their fancy. Without a theme the only commonality is that all presentations are the same length, twenty slides playing for twenty-

seconds for a total of six minutes and forty seconds per presentation. My introduction to Pecha kucha was a presentation night held at the K-Mix radio station in Hamamatsu, Japan in August 2008.

As a language teacher I immediately started thinking about how I could incorporate this exciting new presentation style into my classroom by having students do Pecha kucha presentations in class and using Pecha kucha myself to help achieve my teaching objectives. In the next part of this paper, I will outline some specific ways in which teachers can have their students use the Pecha kucha presentation style in the classroom.

Student Presentations

The restricted length of a Pecha kucha presentation is well-suited to adaptation for students to do in-class presentations. The spirit behind Pecha kucha is what Garr Reynolds refers to as "restrictions as liberators" (2007). A presentation of longer than six minutes and forty-seconds is often undesirable for pedagogical reasons. The longer a speech is, the greater the likelihood of a significant lexical gap opening up between what the presenter knows and what the listener knows or can understand. Not to mention that a longer speech can often quickly become boring and cause listeners to "tune out." Indeed, consideration of the listeners, usually a classroom of peers, is an important reason to limit presentations to Pecha kucha length. Even a captive audience of ostensibly uninterested classmates may be expected to pay attention and stay alert through a series of interesting and engaging six minute and forty-second presentations in which slides change automatically every twenty-seconds.

Teachers, of course, can and do use various techniques to enforce attention during speeches such as having classmates evaluate their peer's presentations, quizzing them on content, or doing cloze exercises among other things. However, rather than having to impose artificial methods to enforce student attention, a teacher may prefer, at least on occasion, that students sit, listen and enjoy their classmates brief and interesting presentations without having to "do" anything explicit.

The pre-determined length of Pecha kucha presentations can make the normally daunting

idea of doing a presentation, especially in a foreign language, slightly less intimidating. The nature of the format requires students to practice and practice to refine their message. As each slide is only twenty seconds, it allows students to practice it easily. Twenty seconds broken down into a few sentences is a nice chunk of language to learn. Only twenty seconds per slide also means that the message has to be very concise. Students are forced to focus on the language content leading to sharper, higher-quality presentations.

Practicing for a speech of any length allows students time to work on their pronunciation and intonation. This is perhaps especially true of Pecha kucha presentations due to the structure the strict time limit imposes. Knowing that speaking time is limited and that English is a stress-timed language students can practice accenting the correct words. In English, the words stressed are the content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) and the unstressed words are function words (pronouns, articles, prepositions). Practicing a Pecha kucha speech and learning how to naturally stress content words can help students come ever closer to achieving natural-sounding “connected speech.” Indeed, as Celce-Murcia, et al. have noted, “stress, rhythm, and adjustments in connected speech can be easily overlooked in the language classroom. Nonetheless, these invisible signals are among the main clues used by listeners to process incoming speech and are thus of primary importance in the speech communication process” (1996). Winston Churchill once claimed that, “for every minute of speaking I spend at least one hour of preparation.” If students follow the same rule and practice a Pecha kucha speech for six to seven hours before presenting the speech, they can reasonably be expected to achieve better connected speech.

Another important benefit of Pecha kucha, as pointed out by Françoise and Roger Nunn, is that students who are normally shy and “reluctant in the classroom, when given time to prepare often demonstrate abilities in their speeches which are not revealed in other classroom activities” (2005). Missing the opportunity to exploit these abilities would be a shame indeed. Shy and somewhat reticent students may often evince an attention to detail and desire for preparation that may be a drawback during more free-form conversational classroom activities but serve them well in

preparing and presenting in the classroom.

Perhaps the most practical reason to have students do short speeches in class is that it is a skill transferable to many real-world contexts. In the course of the average working-life many, if not most, people will be called upon at one time or another to present information to others in a meeting or other workplace context. Knowing the Pecha kucha technique and being comfortable making presentations within its confines can be a valuable workplace asset. Consider again for a moment that the reason the creators of the Pecha kucha format came up with the technique was out of frustration and boredom with long, uninteresting speeches. Being able to concisely, articulately and skillfully present important information to colleagues is a skill unlikely to be ignored by workplace superiors. After all, few would want to waste their valuable time sitting through a long and boring presentation when an experienced Pecha kucha presenter can say the same thing in six minutes and forty seconds.

In this section I have outlined some of the reasons why teachers may want to have their students do presentations in class. In the next section I will review a few of the reasons some researchers are opposed to students doing presentations in class. Space constraints preclude anything other than a brief rebuttal to those arguments.

The Wisdom of Student Presentations

As mentioned in the Introduction to this paper, research results support a number of valid pedagogical benefits to having students present in class. However, there are still many who debate the utility of having EFL students give speeches in class. Some researchers suggest that students may find the idea of oral presentations frustrating and intimidating. Students can easily be overwhelmed with the research and communication skills that are necessary for a successful presentation. As Jane King notes, “Some serious students who invest time and effort into an oral presentation do not always get the intended outcomes. Other students try to get through the ordeal as quickly as possible, but do not improve their speaking skills under such stressful situations. Thus oral presentations can be a time-consuming project with no guarantee of a satisfactory performance” (2002). An unsuccessful presentation can be a devastating blow to the confidence of anyone, as I can attest

to from personal experience. Even so, if a teacher sets achievable speech goals and with enough support and time to prepare, students should succeed. A successful presentation experience can result in a sense of accomplishment and increased confidence.

Another criticism questions the wisdom of using a large chunk of valuable and limited class time to have students work on presentations. The position is that classroom time should be spent on other tasks and if presentations are a part of the course they should be prepared completely outside of class. Knowing, however, that making presentations is a transferable skill applicable to many workplaces it seems reasonable to use lesson time to help students prepare for and practice their presentations. Although many university teachers often refuse to acknowledge it, a part of our jobs is to do our best to prepare students for the working world they will face after graduation.

Some researchers claim that students presenting in a second or foreign language are actually speaking on a topic about which they have only "artificial" knowledge (King, 2002). They have researched a topic and prepared a speech but, in reality, possess only a temporary command of the subject matter which is neither broad nor deep. The criticism is that students tend to just memorize blocks of language that they immediately forget. The fact is, however, that there is always someone who knows more about any given subject than any given presenter. In addition, teacher objectives regarding student speeches are often more holistic and less

concerned with whether material is memorized or learned and enters a student's "interlanguage" or not (Selinker, 1972). In terms of achieving my teaching goals, if the student can successfully present interesting content to an audience that finds it engaging and informative, their speech can be deemed successful.

Still another criticism alluded to previously is that there is often a significant lexical gap between the presenter and the audience which can greatly harm comprehension. The audience will rarely have the same store of background knowledge and schemata to draw upon when listening, as the presenter does when presenting. This criticism actually serves to encourage the use of Pecha kucha presentations as the visual and swift moving element of the presentation style is a perfect way to make material more understandable to the listener. The presenter can use slides and other techniques to help listeners bridge the gaps in their knowledge and maintain interest in the speeches.

Conclusion

Pecha kucha is an exciting new presentation style with many potential applications to the language learning class. It gives teachers another option in the classroom and ways to apply it are limited only by their own creativity. Of course, teachers need not stick religiously to the twenty images for twenty seconds format. Mini Pecha kucha, twenty images for ten seconds each, or ten images for twenty seconds each give you a presentation format of just over three minutes



Pecha kucha Night Hamamatsu, Japan August 1, 2008

allowing up to twenty five students to present in a ninety minute lesson. The fact that Pecha kucha presentations were started in Japan by two non-Japanese and have spread throughout the world so rapidly and successfully clearly indicates that people everywhere appreciate short and visually engaging presentations. In future semesters, I will be exploring ways in which teachers, rather than rely on their students to present, can give their own Pecha kucha presentations in class to reach their instructional goals.

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